

Bienvenido Lumbera, the Ateneo Years (1961-1972)

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This is a slightly edited version of the author's Introduction to Bienvenido Lumbera at "Bienvenidos: Sa Muling Pagbabalik," a program initiated by the School of Humanities, Ateneo de Manila University, to honor the new National Artist. It was held at Escaler Hall, Ateneo de Manila University, 22 September 2006.

We are gathered here tonight to honor Dr. Bienvenido Lumbera and his singular achievements as one of the nation's National Artists.

That he has played and continues to play a key role in defining the role of the artist in a troubled society is an established fact. His involvements in various mass movements have made him an ubiquitous presence. His work with such organizations as Bayan, Concerned Artists of the Philippines, and other groups, has crystallized in us an image of an individual whose vision of nationhood has remained clear and steadfast through the vagaries of time. His detention at Camp Bicutan shortly after the declaration of Martial Law in 1972 was only a part, indeed a major part, in a riveting narrative of his quest for an ideal world, but with feet firmly on the ground.

But only a few of us know anything about his life before his activist days. In retrospect, life was a constant struggle against numerous odds in the early years.

Bienvenido Lumbera was in his early twenties (a journalism graduate of Santo Tomas University) when he first left for the United

States as a Fulbright scholar in 1956. He received a Master's degree and completed his doctoral courses at the University of Indiana between 1956 and 1960. He then joined the Department of English of the Ateneo de Manila University in 1961, as he did research for his dissertation on the development of Tagalog Poetry. In the postwar decades, fledgling scholars like him confronted tremendous obstacles—the absence of comprehensive research guides, appalling state of research, primary materials languishing in libraries, the general air of indifference to formal studies being done on aspects of Philippine Literature. In those years, literature in English enjoyed a privileged status over vernacular literature, a condition that still prevails today.

Dr. Lumbera subsequently returned to Indiana University to finish and defend his dissertation in 1966-67. He was a thirty-five-year-old newly minted graduate of a prestigious university when he returned to the Philippines in 1967. He subsequently took over the Chairmanship of the English department from Antonio Manuud in 1968. By the late 1960s, the country was already in the grip of powerful societal forces and demands for change reverberated in the air. The University on the hill did not remain unscathed, as faculty and students agitated for change which was bound to create conflicts on various levels. Lumbera was a casualty of the ongoing ideological struggle.

Today, after thirty-four years, he has returned to the University where he spent more than decade as an administrator, a teacher to undergraduates, a mentor to graduate students (some of whom are here with us as faculty members, older and we hope, wiser!). Had his activities been limited to teaching and mentoring, Dr. Lumbera would be remembered fondly by countless Ateneans, for whom the years before Martial Law were palpably real, and not mere footnotes in history, for his passion for scholarship and staunch nationalism.

In retrospect, however, Dr. Lumbera did much more, much more than generations of teachers after him are probably not even dimly aware of. Such is the failure of institutional memory to retrieve and preserve aspects of its past that help define how the Ateneo tradition has evolved through the years.

Realizing the power of education to mould minds, the English Department initiated changes in the core curriculum and graduate courses in the 1960s. A pivot was made from the Eurocentric orientation to a thrust that sought to teach literature in terms of genre. Thus, the literature courses were taught as Introduction to Fiction, Introduction to Poetry, Introduction

to Drama, and Introduction to the Essay. Short stories and poems from different parts of the world appeared in the textbooks. The course on the essay offered an alternative view of the genre as more than just appreciating the exquisite artistry of English and American essays. In *Rediscovery*, the En 26 textbook, Filipino writers (e. g. Fr. Horacio de la Costa, SJ, Renato Constantino, Mary Racelis, Leon Ma. Guerrero, Claro M. Recto) and a few foreign social scientists (e. g., Mary Catherine Bateson, Harold C. Conklin, William Henry Scott, Edgar Wickberg) explored issues pertaining to Philippine history and culture.

In the summer of 1969, Philippine Literature was offered as a graduate course and allowed the entry of hitherto marginalized Filipino authors into the curriculum. The course was handled by Dr. Lumbera and Nicanor Tiongson.

As a result of the growing interest in Philippine studies, Lumbera, Manuud and Tinio conceived of a lecture series, to be given by Filipino scholars from various disciplines, aimed at clarifying key disciplinal issues in literature, history, anthropology, music, to name a few. It is in this series where Lumbera demonstrated the power of his intellect as he studied Tagalog literature and its cultural and historical context. Studies had earlier been done on those topics but not in the way that manifested a scholar's painstaking research. The book came out as *Brown Heritage* (1967) edited by Antonio Manuud.

In the field of criticism dominated by critics—Filipinos and a few foreigners—and focused mainly on literature in English, Lumbera's critical essays infused a new energy into criticism in the vernacular. In several issues in the late 1960s, *Philippine Studies* published his pioneering dissertation on Tagalog poetry that contextualized the texts against culture and history. His scholarship and comprehensive analysis of Tagalog poetry lent respectability to an area where solid analysis and scholarship were hardly evident.

Through his initiative, *Philippine Studies* published the Urian series where the writing of major writers in Filipino (extremely popular in their time but now marginalized) were analyzed by such foremost Filipino writers as Teodoro A. Agoncillo, Amado V. Hernandez, Andres Cristobal Cruz, to name a few. Consequently, the writing of Cirio H. Panganiban, Patricio Mariano, Lope K. Santos, Jose Corazon de Jesus, among others, occupied center stage in the prestigious journal better known for its studies in theology, philosophy and history.

Dr. Lumbera also contributed to the formation of a group of young

campus writers collectively known as “Bagay Poets” who, in the tradition of western Imagist poets such as Ezra Pound, wrote to render objective reality by approximating the “thingness of the thing.” Salvador Bernal, Jose Lacaba, Emmanuel Lacaba, Alfredo Navarro Salanga, among others, wrote poems stripped of all the excesses highly favored by generations of poets, in the country and elsewhere, who had succumbed to the influence of Romantic poets. This painstaking effort to capture the image in its purest, unadulterated form remains the hallmark of poetry written by Ateneo poets, thanks to the influence of Lumbera and Tinio who also wrote poetry, and their colleague Eric Torres who was making a name for himself in the 1960s.

On November 17, 1968, *The Guidon*, the campus newspaper, came out with an article, “Down From the Hill” penned by several Ateneans. In the article, the writers argued the need for the University to answer the challenge of Filipinization, in the midst of nationwide calls for a more nationalist orientation as a response to the pressing needs of a country, a victim of its history as a colonized nation. The mass movements on campus resulted in massive cries for boycotts, teach-ins, book-burning, tire-burning, testy confrontations between the students and some Jesuits, as administration sought to address the issue.

Questions about the role and function of Ateneo had already been raised on campus in the 1960s. The issue gained urgency as the unrest spread. In 1970, the Kagawaran ng Araling Pilipino was formed with Dr. Lumbera as the Director. Nicanor Tiongson, a member of the English faculty and a rising scholar, joined him, and so did Virgilio Almario, who was making a name for himself as a modern Filipino poet. And so did the prized recruit, Amado V. Hernandez, a venerable icon whose life and career as a labor leader, crusading journalist and committed poet and novelist, caused his imprisonment as a political prisoner. Dr. Lumbera persuaded the feisty writer from Tondo, newly released from prison, to teach at the elite university. Two courses—Panitikan at Retorika—were required of all Bachelor of Arts students. The Kagawaran also offered courses in Tagalog Poetry and Tagalog Novel.

In 1970, as a result of the newly discovered “relevance” of Filipino in the nationalist struggle, the first workshop in Filipino, the Palihan, was held at the Art Galley of the University. This workshop was significant as the first-ever workshop that invited young writers writing in Filipino, and staffed by established luminaries in Tagalog literature that included Clodualdo del Mundo (from the much maligned weekly magazine *Liwayway*), Ponciano B. P. Pineda, Pablo Glorioso, and fictionist Anacleto Dizon, to name a few.

The participants included Jose Lacaba, Rogelio Sicat, Ruth Elynia Mabanglo, Rosario de Guzman Lingat, and others, whose contributions to literature could not be denied. This Palihan took issue with the notion that English was the pre-eminent of language for creative writing and criticism, even as it questioned the role of critics schooled in Formalism as exclusive arbiters of literary taste, an unexamined assumption in various English workshops.

Such crucial questions on the nature of literature in a colonized country, on its function vis-à-vis the ordinary readers, the role of Filipino in the production of texts, the role of the writer, the relationship between matter and form, among others, were to be further addressed and systematically explained when PAKSA (Panulat Para sa Kaunlaran ng Sambayanan) was formed by Lumbera and Almario, to name a few, in March 1971. The critique of the existing power structure in culture and literature had now become multi-layered, even as the movement gained a huge following among faculty members and students in various universities.

In retrospect, it is easy to understand—given the historical and comparativist orientation of Dr. Lumbera’s career as a scholar and critic; given the interconnected events impacting and almost destroying the nation in the 1960s and 1970s; and given the calls for intellectuals to join pro-people movements—his deepening commitment to the nationalist cause to the extent of losing his freedom. His role as an intellectual was thus fused with his role as a nationalist. His aesthetics and his politics had become intertwined.

The scholar/critic never lost his profound sense of history. He was never a dyed-in-the-wool Formalist for whom nothing mattered except ART, even in the early stages of his career as a critic. Tradition and historical-specific contexts always had a role to play in any production of texts. This was evident in his well-researched dissertation, and became more pronounced in his other books on the history of Philippine Literature, on the cinema, on vernacular literature, on popular culture.

In 1994, Dr. Lumbera received the Ramon Magsaysay Award. In his response, he said:

Kung may nakamtang mga tagumpay ang kilusang makabayan ng dekada sesenta at setenta ito, sa palagay ko, ang pinakapangmatagalan. Ipagdiwang natin ang pagkaahon ng Panitikang Pilipino sa kumunoy ng neokolonyal na edukasyon.

In 2000, the Ateneo de Manila University conferred on Dr. Lumbera its Tanglaw ng Lahi Award, thirty years after it was first awarded to Amado

V. Hernandez in 1970. It is important to stress that Dr. Lumbera was responsible for the institutionalization of this award given to outstanding Filipinos in culture, the arts and history.

Dekada sesenta at dekada setenta—mga taong ginugol ni Dr. Lumbera sa Ateneo. Sa kanyang pagbabalik, makabubuting itanong natin sa ating sarili kung tunay nga bang nakaahon na tayo sa kolonyal na edukasyon sa ating pamantasan. Ang sagot, “Hindi pa lubusan.” Subalit dahil si Dr. Lumbera ay mahalagang bahagi ng ating nakaraan, nararapat lamang na balik-balikan natin ang mga panahong iyon, at tiyaking mananatiling buhay ang lantay na pamanang naiwan niya sa atin. Dapat na ikintal natin sa alaala (na napakadaling marahuyo sa kislap at ningning ng mga bago at panandaliang pananaw), at hindi kailanman ibaon sa limot ang mga pagbabagong kanyang isinulong. Nagbigay-daan ang mga ganitong hakbang sa pagbabago ng pangkalahatang oryentasyon sa ilang Kagawaran—English, Filipino at Interdisciplinary Studies—at sa pamumulaklak ng makabuluhang sining at kritisismo sa loob ng ilang dekada sa ating pamantasan.

Today, our National Artist has returned to his home. And his own has received him with joy!

Sa ating Pambansang Alagad ng Sining—Maligayang Pagbabalik! ♦